Lafayette Historical Society NEWS Enlightening Our Community

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Located on the Lower Level of the Lafayette Library

Prohibition in Lamorinda: Temperance leaders, law enforcement, and the saloons, resorts, moonshiners, and blind pigs they shut down

Join the Lafayette Historical Society for a presentation by Leslie Crenna at the Lafayette Branch of the Contra Costa County Library in the Don Tatzin Community Hall, 3491 Mount Diablo Blvd, Lafayette, CA, Thursday, July 31, 2025, 6:30pm to 8:30pm.

Despite just a few saloons dotting this rural locale, the temperance-minded hamlet of Lafayette voted itself dry twice before federal Prohibition came into force across the country in 1920. Ten years beforehand, community members like blacksmith Peter Thomson, postmaster Carrie Van Meter, and General Merchandise store owner Robert Elam McNeil, successfully testified to deny the proprietors Williams & Vossler of the New Lafayette Hotel a liquor license.

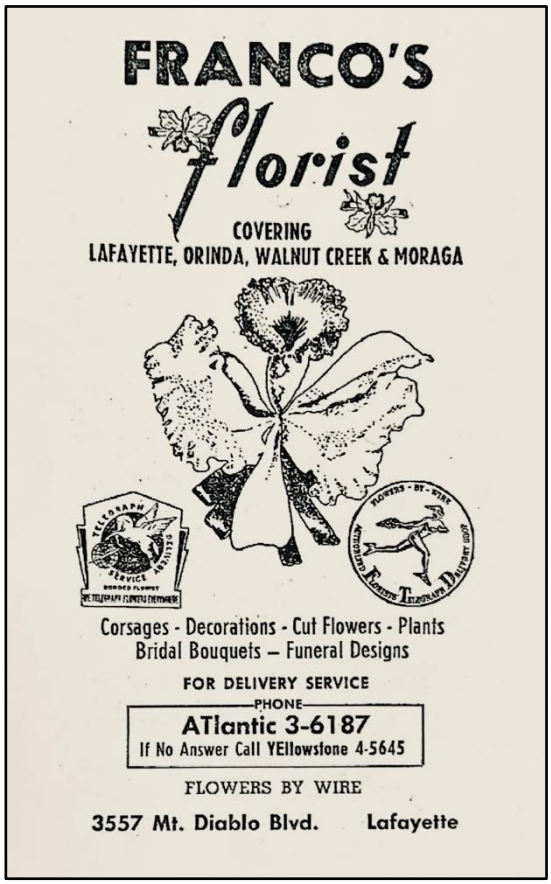
LOU BORGHESANI OPENED LOU'S BAR IN 1934 IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE REPEAL OF PROHIBITION, DECEMBER 1933. A NEW LOCATION AND A NEW NAME, THE ROUNDUP SALOON, FOLLOWED SOON AFTER. PHOTO COURTESY LAFAYETTE HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

But it wasn't enough. Moonshiners proliferated with one of the biggest busts countywide in the Reliez Valley in 1929. Repeal at the end of 1933 and the inauguration of the Lafayette Horseman's Association Horse Show in 1935 cued resilient businessmen like Lou Borghesani to start what became and still survives today as the Roundup Saloon.

Leslie Crenna will tell the story of the Prohibition in the Lamorinda area, focusing specifically on Lafayette, Contra Costa County, drawing on newspaper reports, primary research documents, and the photo collections of the Lafayette and Contra Costa County historical societies. Some national and state level context will frame a main focus on Contra Costa County developments as well as Lamorinda residents and businesses of the past. Curious community members are encouraged to share family Prohibition stories to deepen our collective knowledge.

The event will end with a short Meet and Greet. Please join us!

FRANCO'S FLORIST



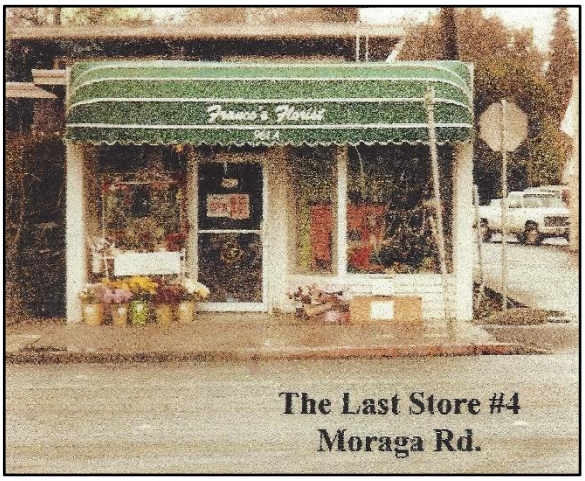
Cliff Franco (1913 - 2002), the son of immigrant parents from the Azore Islands, was raised in West Oakland in an environment that was highly immersed in the Portuguese culture. The family of Aileen (Drake) Franco (1915 - 2001) was of English and Irish descent. She was an only child, and after the death of her mother when she was just a girl, she was raised by her father and his two sisters. Her father, reputed to be an astute businessman, was a concessionaire at Idora Park, which was not far from the family home in the Rockridge area of Oakland.

Cliff and Aileen both attended school at University High. In 1935, a few years after graduating, they were married at St. Augustine's Catholic Church. They started raising a family in 1937, becoming the proud parents of four sons: Jack, Cliff, Jim and Ken. Shortly after the birth of their second baby, the family settled into a home in the Redwood Heights neighborhood of Oakland. Later, the family moved to a home in Rockridge to be closer to St. Augustine's, where all four boys were attending school.

Prior to the move to Lafayette, Cliff worked for the Key System as a streetcar operator during the day and as a professional musician at night. Known for his talent and creativity, he performed at many clubs and hotels in the Bay Area, including the Sir Francis Drake and Huntington Hotel in San Francisco. During these early years, Aileen had her hands full as a stay-at-home mom managing the various household tasks and attending to the needs of four very active young sons.

After World War II, the Francos joined many others in the desire to migrate from the city to the suburbs. It was time for Aileen to enter the work force, and the time was just right in the early 1950's for the Francos to start their own business. Two of their sons were already teens, and the third son was not far behind. Aileen had fallen in love with Lafayette. It was just what she was hoping for - a small town where everybody knew everybody. Cliff was very creative, an artist. He had always loved being around flowers and made an excellent floral designer. Aileen had an intuitive business sense and excellent management skills, and with their combined talents, the husband and wife team were destined to be successful business partners.

Franco's Florist opened their doors for business in the spring 1954. Their first shop was at 3557-A Mt. Diablo Blvd. in the Stanley Building. In June, the family sold their Oakland home, packed their bags, and moved to Lafayette. During the time, their sons worked in the family business after school during their high school years. Some of the boys' friends, as well as other students from Acalanes, were hired to work in the shop. In the early 1960's, they expanded their business by moving just down the street to a larger building that had previously been occupied by Village Liquors at 3543 Mt. Diablo Blvd. Later on their business moved to an even larger building at the South West corner of Mt. Diablo Blvd. and Moraga Road. The fourth and final move was to a much smaller building at 961-A Moraga Road. At that point, Cliff and Aileen thought it best to downsize in preparation for their retirement years. All in all, Franco's Florist of Lafayette was in business for 35 years.



Three of Cliff & Aileen's sons followed in their parents' footsteps. Cliff, like his father, studied music and became a dedicated musician from a very early age. Like his father, he had a natural talent for playing a variety of instruments and a wonderful singing voice. As an adult, he was a professional jazz musician for many years. Jim, also became a musician. As a child he initially played the accordion, then the tuba in the Acalanes High School band. After graduation, Jim joined the U.S Army as a career. He was in the brass section of their military band stationed at the Presidio in San Francisco. Ken, the youngest, loved the business and knew from the time he was a teen that he wanted to be a florist. He opened his own business (also named Franco's Florist) in Martinez, which was in business there for 25 years.

REMEMBERING THE EL NIDO RANCHO HOTEL: "A Million Miles from Nowhere"

Tucked into the sun-dappled curves of the Tunnel Strip, just as you entered Lafayette, there once stood a roadside gem—El Nido Rancho Hotel. In the golden postwar years of the late 1940s through the 1950s, this wasn't just a hotel. It was a destination…

You couldn't miss it on the old Tunnel Strip—a scenic alternate route for savvy drivers who preferred winding roads and rustic charm over the traffic and grit of downtown Oakland. Rising above the roadside like a beacon was El Nido Rancho's signature windmill sign, a landmark that marked the start of something special. With 35 ranch-style rooms and the kind of easygoing Western luxury that made guests feel both pampered and right at home, El Nido Rancho catered to everyone from road-tripping families to honeymooners, from traveling salesmen to silver-haired sweethearts on a weekend getaway.

"El Nido Rancho," the ads shouted in bold, Western-flavored flair, "Luxury living at a modest cost!" They promised modern comfort—twin or double beds with up-to-the-

minute heating, radios, telephones, and bathrooms that gleamed with the best of the era. But more than that, they offered something harder to define: the feeling of being "a million miles from nowhere," all while being just a short drive from San Francisco.

Fittingly, el nido means "the nest" in Spanish—and that's exactly what it was: a restful perch, snug and slightly hidden, where people could land for a night or a weekend and feel wrapped in a slower, gentler rhythm. Whether you were escaping the city or escaping something else entirely, El Nido Rancho offered refuge.

And then, of course, there was the food.

"Chuck-Wagon" Louie, the gravel-voiced emcee of El Nido's legendary dining scene, knew how to pull in a crowd. His ads were as colorful as the man himself: "IMPRESS YOUR FRIENDS! WE'RE OPEN 7:30 IN THE YAWNIN 'TIL 2 THE NEXT A.M. SERVING BREAKFAST, LUNCH, AND DINNER... 7 DAYS A WEEK."

On Sundays, the action shifted poolside, where the Chuckwagon Brunch lured locals and travelers alike. For just $1.50, you could dig into ranch-style ham and eggs and a sky-high stack of all-you-can-eat hotcakes. Music drifted through the air from the Jack Lloyd and Wes Day Trio, and the smell of coffee and syrup mingled with chlorine and wildflowers.

Come evening, the smorgasbord dinners stole the show— starting at just $1.75. No cover. No minimum. Just the soft glow of lantern light, the clink of cocktail glasses, and the soothing rhythm of a dance band carrying couples across the floor. The lounge served up bourbons and Scotch with quiet pride, the kind of pours that loosened stories and made strangers into friends.

But behind all the hospitality and homey charm, there were whispers—rumors of a secret back room, tucked just behind the cocktail lounge. Some say it held more than extra chairs and cocktail napkins. The story goes that a few slot machines were hidden away there, only for special guests—friends of the house, regulars who knew to ask, or those who tipped well enough to be led through the right door. Whether it was legal or not was beside the point. It was the Wild West, after all—or at least El Nido's cheerful version of it.

Of course, not everyone came for the pancakes and poker. El Nido Rancho developed a certain... reputation, let's say, for clandestine rendezvous. Tucked away in a still-rural Lafayette, it offered just the right mix of seclusion and discretion—far enough from prying eyes, but close enough for a quick escape. The parking lot in back wasn't just for convenience; it was for privacy. El Nido Rancho, after all, was a place where what happened on the Tunnel Strip stayed on the Tunnel Strip.

El Nido Rancho wasn't flashy in the Hollywood sense. It was something more enduring: a slice of the American West, comfortable and unpretentious. The kind of place where someone might propose after dinner—or where others... well, tried not to get caught.

But the world around El Nido Rancho began to shift. In 1957, the new freeway opened, carving through the hills with the promise of the future. Suddenly, the once-popular Tunnel Strip lost some of its magical allure. The new route bypassed El Nido Rancho entirely, cutting off the easy access that had once brought travelers by the carload. To make matters worse, a chunk of the property itself was claimed for construction, trimming away both land and livelihood. And instead of feeling "a million miles from nowhere," the place now sat beside a freeway, with cars zipping past at breakneck speed.

Business dwindled. The music faded. And eventually, the doors closed—for good.

Time has marched on, and the El Nido Rancho has faded into memory… But ask anyone who was there—and their eyes will brighten. They'll talk about the Sunday brunches, the dancing, the warm scent of pancakes on the breeze, and maybe—just maybe—a lucky night in the back room… or behind a very convenient alias.

El Nido Rancho may be gone—but in the hearts of those who remember, it still stands—just down the road, in a time when life moved a little slower, and the West was full of wonder. Today, what remains of the site where El Nido Rancho once welcomed travelers is part of Bentley School—a quieter kind of landmark, but one still filled with life. Some places never fully disappear. They just settle into the landscape, waiting to be remembered.

~~John Kennett

The Lafayette Historical Society hopes you re enjoying these glimpses into our town s past. We invite you to help us preserve stories like this by visiting our website or becoming a member. Together, we can keep Lafayette s history alive for generations to come. The History Room at the Lafayette Library is open Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. To learn more: www.lafayettehistory.org Follow us on Facebook: Lafayette Historical Society

MEMBERSHIP UPDATE 2025

Welcome to our new members and to those who have recently renewed their membership or have made a donation:

Thank you for your support of the Lafayette Historical Society.

Shane Reisman	**Sue Nurock**	**Paul Sheehan**
Alice Turner	**Anne & Marshall Grodin**	**Kelly Daggs**
Robin Rudderow	**Laura Torkelson**	**Joan Evans**
Wayne Lawson	**Lauren Deal**	**Stuart Collett**
Michelle Fanto Chan	**Kim Bertolero**	**Mary Kersting**
Mary Ann Hoisington	**Eric & Margaret Schreiber**	**David Ogden**
Blake Hedlund		**Stuart Robinson**

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP DUES

Your membership is exceedingly important as it makes it possible for our organization to pay annual rent to the City of Lafayette for our space and be able to pay for our phone, insurance, and other needed supplies. Donations are always appreciated.
Student Membership: $15 ~ Individual Membership: $30 ~ Family Membership: $60

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